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ABSTRACT

High stakes assessments cannot reliably provide an accurate assessment of English language learners' (ELLs)' abilities in content areas. Cultural differences and limitations concerning opportunity to learn can lead to unfair interpretations of low test scores and assessment discrimination. ELLs cannot demonstrate content mastery without having already attained a high degree of English fluency. While most states allow ELLs certain accommodations during testing, application of these accommodations is limited. Accommodations cannot be applied to groups of ELLs without careful consideration of each student's ability to make use of them. Some states offer ELLs a grace period before taking standardized state tests, though research maintains that ELLs need 5-7 years of assisted English instruction before being ready for the decontextualized academic English needed to pass most tests. For many ELLs, the tests contradict their own academic traditions and expectations and contain culturally dependent, unfamiliar references. While all children are entitled to an equal opportunity to achieve, many court cases involving ELLs center on lack of opportunity to learn. Alternatives to high stakes testing include multiple assessments of content area skills that are not dependent on linguistic capability and comprise visuals and demonstrations of knowledge. Research indicates that when given a chance to develop academic English, child ELLs can be more successful than their native-English-speaking peers. (SM)

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TESOL Position Paper on High-Stakes Testing for K-12 English Language Learners in the United States of America

With the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), starting in 2005 states will be required to test students yearly in mathematics and reading in grades 3 and 9 and once in high school to maintain eligibility for federal funds (ESEA, 2001). Additionally, more and more states are requiring all students to pass standardized tests to graduate or matriculate to higher grades. As of 2002, 24 states had this requirement, with 6 more expected to add it by 2003 (Cavanagh, 2002). However, just as these high-stakes assessments (assessments that influence or dictate major educational decisions) have become more popular, professional groups of educators, such as the American Educational Researchers' Association, have been opposing such assessments' influence in making high-stakes decisions. In addition, these tests are often unfair to English language learners and cannot be relied on to provide an accurate assessment of an English language learner's abilities in content areas.

Inasmuch as these tests measure content in combination with linguistic abilities, English language learners are at a distinct disadvantage that is difficult to accommodate. Further, cultural differences and limitations concerning opportunity to learn can lead to unfair interpretations of low test scores and assessment discrimination.

The proposed goal of these assessments is to chart a child's progress accurately through a predetermined set of standards and educational goals. However, for many reasons that have little to do with academic ability, these tests do not provide a clear picture of many English language learners around the country. Additionally, while some states do provide native language assessments for English language learner students, these tests are quite controversial. Native language assessments are most appropriate for students who come to the United States with extensive literacy and education in their native languages. Because most standardized assessment tests are based on state standards, however, students educated outside the states often have difficulty with them.

Content and Linguistic Abilities

Most content assessments are also considered to be measures of an English language learner's linguistic competence (Short, 1993). In other words, English language learners cannot demonstrate their mastery of content without having already attained a high degree of English fluency. Many English language learners come to this country with significant content knowledge; however, they often cannot express this knowledge because they lack academic proficiency in English (LaCelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994).

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To level the playing field for students with limited English proficiency, most states allow for certain accommodations to be made during testing (Goertz & Duffy, 2001). The most common of these are flexible scheduling, flexible time limitations, use of a bilingual dictionary, and/or a translation of the test itself. Yet, application of each of these accommodations is limited.

Accommodations cannot be applied to groups of English language learners without careful consideration of each student's ability to make use of the accommodation. For example, one would not provide a bilingual dictionary as an accommodation to a student who is not literate in his or her native language. Furthermore, a translated version of a test of academic achievement is not an accommodation for a child who has never received academic instruction in that language. Hence, while accommodations are helpful to some English language learners, they cannot be relied on to level the playing field for all English language learners without careful and detailed consideration of each individual situation.

Perhaps the most obvious contradiction between current research on English language acquisition and high-stakes testing lies in the grace period most states give to English language learners. While some states offer English language learners a grace period before they must take the standardized state test, accepted research in English as a second language (ESL) maintains that an English language learner needs between 5 and 7 years of assisted English instruction before he or she is ready for the decontextualized academic English needed to be successful in classroom setting and pass most academic tests (Cummins, 1984).

Cultural and Educational Differences

Most children who grow up in a typical American academic environment quickly become familiar with the format and expectations involved in most tests in U.S. schools. However, for many English language learners, these tests can contradict their own academic traditions and expectations (Porter & Samovar, 1991). As a simple example, cultural differences in time expectations can cause serious problems for English language learners. By the time most American children matriculate to the third grade, they are familiar with timed tests and with the concept that they must accomplish a certain amount of work within a limited amount of time. However, for English language learners who come from countries without such limitations, the concept of time limits in testing can be difficult to comprehend and equally difficult to adhere to. Additionally, many test questions contain culturally dependent references (holidays, historical figures, etc.) that are unfamiliar to English language learners.

Opportunity to Learn

Many critical court cases involving English language learners have centered on an English language learner's opportunity to learn. In other words, all children in U.S. schools, regardless of language, must be given equal opportunity to achieve. In fact, the

landmark decision in Lau vs. Nichols (1974) hinged on the debate over whether a group of Chinese children who were given books and instruction in English had appropriate opportunity to learn considering the fact that they could not understand the materials or the instruction. The U.S. Supreme Court determined that equal instruction and materials in English did not constitute equal opportunity to learn, and, as a result, states were required to provide adapted instruction for English language learners.

In high-stakes tests, children who are expected to show appropriate knowledge of certain content area subjects must have received appropriate opportunity to master state standards. Very often it is difficult to determine whether English language learners have been given the opportunity to learn because English language learners are at a linguistic disadvantage, and content area subjects are not always taught by teachers who are well versed in classroom adaptations for ESL students. Additionally, English language learners who come to the United States in the later grades are often frustrated and discouraged when they realize they will not acquire enough English to pass the tests before they reach the final grade. These students, who sometimes also come with limited content knowledge, all too often become dropout statistics.

Conclusion

In its statement on assessment and accountability (2000), TESOL has outlined a variety of recommendations for assessment of English language learners. One of the most critical of these is the definition of purpose. Each assessment's purpose should be identified clearly with assurances that English language learner students have the skills to fulfill that purpose, and no other factors, such as linguistic and cultural differences, are interfering with their performance. Additionally, all school personnel should be knowledgeable about the challenges that English language learners face when being assessed.

Many alternatives to high-stakes tests include multiple assessments of content area skills that are not dependent on linguistic capability. Such assessments often comprise visuals and demonstrations of knowledge. Classroom teachers are often the best source of information on how much content English language learners have acquired within their range of English proficiency. Portfolios can demonstrate growth over time in content areas and English-language proficiency. These assessments not only provide insightful information about a student's progress but can also be individualized to meet the needs of individual students who are under great pressure to learn English as quickly as possible.

Finally, everyone involved in education must realize the importance of allowing children enough time to learn academic English. The Ramirez report (1991) among others, supports late-exit programs that allow children to develop skills in their native language while transitioning and applying these same skills to English. According to the report's authors, these children are often more successful than their native-English-speaking peers.

This is not to suggest that English language learners and their teachers should not be held accountable for their learning. However, if the goal of high-stakes testing is to map progress, then that information obtained from these assessments should be reliable and valid. Yet, as evidenced above, it is far too difficult to determine whether these single measures are valid or reliable when used to gauge English language learners' achievement. Since high English proficiency is a prerequisite for success on high-stakes tests, such assessments are not appropriate for English language learners and often do more harm than good.

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